

REVIEW & OUTLOOK

To Tell the Truth

"The imposing rise of Solidarity in Poland in the summer of 1980 and consequent social convulsions constituted a most acute crisis for the socialist states of Eastern Europe. . . . In some secret place, where every secret is wrapped in another secret, some political figure of great power took note of this most grave situation and, mindful of the vital needs of the Eastern bloc, decided it was necessary to kill Pope Wojtyla."

This statement by Italian State Prosecutor Antonio Albano is the first official suggestion that the Soviet Union ordered the 1981 assassination attempt on the Pope—Italians know which nation Churchill described as "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma." Mr. Albano is entirely explicit in saying the plot was hatched and paid for by "the Bulgarian secret services," and has requested the indictment and trial of nine people—three Bulgarian spies, five members of the Sofia-linked Turkish mafia and Mehmet Ali Agca, the hit man now in Italian custody. Sergei Antonov, one of the Bulgarians, also is in Italian hands.

The prosecutor's 78-page report was leaked to free-lance investigative reporter Claire Sterling; the New York Times decided to play her dispatch on page one of its Sunday edition, jumping inside for 5,000 words or so. The story has been a difficult one for the Times. In March 1983 it published a previous lengthy article by Nicholas Gage supporting the Bulgarian connection. But CIA sources tended to shoot down this connection. A New York Times reporter last October concluded that "the Antonov case appears as one of deprivation of liberty on the accusation of a single witness of doubtful character, an assassin convicted of murder in Turkey and attempted murder of the Pope and of uncertain emotional stability to boot." Yesterday columnist William Safire remarked that, "From the start, this story was minimized and ridiculed by our C.I.A.," and he calls for an inves-

tigation by the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board.

The Times certainly vindicated its coverage with this latest dispatch, but there remains an issue of why it has taken so long for the press to shake this story loose. In fact, some of our colleagues went all out to declare Antonov innocent. When Antonov was temporarily released from prison for health reasons, the Guardian of London opined that the Bulgarian connection had lost its "penultimate shred of credibility." Even the Associated Press in Rome has been quick to quote Antonov's lawyers predicting his imminent release. Those of us who ran with the story, these columns and the Reader's Digest, where Mrs. Sterling first published, have been written off as not reliably mainstream. The plot was detailed in Mrs. Sterling's book "The Time of the Assassins" as well as Paul Henze's "The Plot to Kill the Pope," but these books were greeted with skeptical to scoffing reviews.

Now comes Mr. Albano's report with convincing detail and confirming the darkest theories. The Bulgarian Embassy, for example, had actually arranged for a sealed truck to spirit trigger man Agca away without risking customs checks, but the plan went awry when Agca was caught after one of his accomplices failed to set off a diversionary bomb after the shooting. As for corroborating Agca's testimony implicating the Bulgarians, Mr. Albano reports that Agca knew the unlisted telephone number of one of the Bulgarian agents (despite Bulgarian claims the number didn't exist), knew that another collected miniature bottles, and described a small wart on the chin of the third. Most interestingly, the account is woven through with references to the Turkish mafia and the right-wing Turkish terrorists, the Grey Wolves—both groups enjoyed close relationships with the Eastern secret services. The Soviets obviously don't demand ideological commitment from their terrorists, just terror.

The Safire notion that the real problem was less the press than the CIA and other officials gets plenty of support from Mrs. Sterling. She was strongly urged, even threatened, by the U.S. Embassy in Rome to drop the investigation that resulted in her original 1982 Reader's Digest article. The West German police told her she was foolish. She suspects an intentional cover-up by Western governments of the Bulgarian connection. In the end, the story was rooted out by a brave Italian judiciary; during parts of the process Judge Martella's house has been guarded by tanks.

If the reason the story was slow to come out was official hesitancy, what can the press do about it? For one thing, reporters badly burned on this story can go back to their sources in places like Langley and 2201 C Street, and ask what the heck was going on, why Soviet behavior should be off-limits from the truth. For another, they can revise the knee-jerk response that dismisses allegations of grotesque Soviet behavior. We note that the Times and the Washington Post also recently have revised their attitudes toward the expert sources telling them "yellow rain" was merely bee feces. In both cases, we're sure, the horror of the crime and the evilness it pins on the Soviets were just too much.

Accepting the Pope plot as true carries with it an entire view of the nature of the Soviet empire, and it is this view that many in government, in the press and elsewhere have been hesitant to face. But while it's not easy to say how to deal with Soviet lawlessness, the problem can't be faced until we agree it's there. We seem to be much closer to agreement now than a week ago, thanks to the Times, to Claire Sterling and to the Italian judiciary.